

Combustible insulation used on Grenfell Tower was sold at a heavy discount to building company

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The Celotex RS5000 insulation—found by Phase 1 of the Grenfell Inquiry as “more likely than not” to have contributed to the spread of the 2017 inferno—was sold to construction company Harley Facades at a 47.5 percent discount.

The 660 sheets purchased for £45,804 represented the first Celotex product approved for use on buildings above 18 metres but should only have been utilised with a non-combustible cement fibre cladding. During an Inquiry second phase hearing last week, Harley design manager Daniel Anketell-Jones claimed he was unaware of the discount, and remained unsure whether the reduction had come from Celotex through construction products supplier SIG.

The admission came on the second of three days of testimony by Anketell-Jones, in a week dedicated to investigating the role of Harley in the disaster. The fatal use of a more dangerous cladding may have been generated by a pricing error by Harley estimator Mike Albiston. Last Monday, the Inquiry heard that Albiston had omitted several items in his initial estimates for the Reynobond aluminium composite material (ACM). When compared with the zinc-based Proteus HR cladding system, this meant that use of the Reynobond product would save just £376,000 rather than the £576,000 as costed by Albiston.

He later explained to construction company Rydon—the lead contractor which oversaw the entire “refurbishment” of Grenfell—and Harley management that the £200,000 shortfall could be reduced to £162,750 if the project switched to “cassette” panels. These can be hung on hidden rails and have a far worse performance (three grades lower) than face-fixed panels which use rivets to bolt them into place. Albiston claimed he did not know that the Reynobond ACM was more combustible than cassettes. But he agreed that Harley’s commercial manager Mark Harris’s email to Rydon’s Simon Lawrence that “our preference would be cassette for a lot of reasons,” referred to financial savings.

The previous week, the Inquiry learned that Rydon commercial manager Zak Maynard had been well aware that the £200,000 in savings that resulted from the error would be pocketed by the company. When asked by lead counsel for the inquiry, Richard Millett QC, if the finances were then organised so that the error would be absorbed by Kensington & Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), then responsible for managing Grenfell Tower, Maynard admitted, “Potentially, yes.”

Rydon estimator Katie Bachellier had asked him whether Rydon could go “50/50 with Harley” on the savings, “as it was their cock-up.” Maynard wrote later, “First part of the battle, now we will agree to give them 10 per cent of the savings back and we are quids in!!” He told the inquiry that this referred to reducing Harley’s savings share to 10 percent so Rydon could enlarge its profit, but claimed, “I was joking in that bit.”

When Daniel Anketell-Jones testified later that same afternoon, it became clear immediately that his so-called “expertise” also had serious limitations. In its bid for the contract, Harley falsified his CV, listing skills he did not have, as well as two projects he never worked on. He had just begun a master’s degree in facade engineering at the University of Bath in late 2014 or early 2015. Despite his position as design manager, he claimed it was not his job to judge products for technical compliance. He explained that responsibility for this had fallen to the previous manager Graham Hackley, who had not been replaced after he left the company.

At no point in his work for Harley did he claim to be qualified to assess technical performance. He did not know the distinction between “Class 0” rated materials and the higher qualification of “limited combustibility,” nor the difference between a fire stop and a cavity barrier. “I don’t think I was made the technical manager until the end of 2015, beginning of 2016 perhaps. I hadn’t had any training in that area yet.”

Anketell-Jones admitted in his testimony that he had erased all his computer files relating to his work at Harley after an agreement to keep the device after leaving the firm. He insisted “this would mainly have been emails,” although documents, design drawings and calculations would also have disappeared. He said he assumed all his work would be retained on the Harley server, and denied he had any role in removing files from the company’s internal systems.

Inquiry counsel Kate Grange continued to press Anketell-Jones on his fire safety knowledge, pointing out his attendance at a day-long conference run by the Centre for Windows and Cladding Technology (CWCT). This included a talk on “fire testing experiences,” with sections on “fire testing for facades,” “incidents” and “mechanics of external fire spread.” He claimed not remembering anything about it. “I think I might have been there and not concentrating because it wasn’t what I was trained in and not part of my remit.”

However, in his testimony last Wednesday, it was shown that the design manager was not as clueless about fire risks as he had claimed. In a day focusing on the fire-stopping and installation properties of cavity barriers around the windows, Anketell-Jones again observed, “Each individual person would look after the responsibility on the projects,” and no one existed across the company with the assignment to “think about fire.” But Grange questioned him about an email he sent to stakeholders at the time, claiming, “There is no point of fire stopping; as we all know, the ACM will be gone rather quickly in a fire.” Asked how he squared this observation with earlier comments about his ignorance, Anketell-Jones attributed it to “picking up bits and pieces over the years,” and that he knew from his design training that aluminium would soon melt and fall off the building.

Later that afternoon the expertise of another Harley manager was examined. Kevin Lamb, a freelance draughtsman who had initially been brought in for 41 days’ work, was soon passed off by Harley as “project designer,” despite not being a qualified architect. With a 30-year career that included some cladding experience as well as curtain wall and window assignments, his task was to furnish a drafting service, transferring architect Studio E’s plans into fabrication drawings—allowing the cladding system to be constructed and installed. He assumed Studio E bore responsibility for building regulations compliance. “I was never told I was lead designer. I was told, I was project designer. The first I knew of that was when they [Harley] had some business cards printed up with my name on.”

As Lamb was finishing his explanations at the inquiry, the injustices mounting against the Grenfell bereaved and survivors intensified.

In the US, a court in Pennsylvania dismissed all charges

for civil damages brought by Grenfell survivors and bereaved against cladding maker Arconic and insulation manufacturer Celotex, both of whom have headquarters in the US state. The judges ruled all charges should be heard in the UK. Arconic and Celotex witnesses will testify later at the Inquiry regarding the testing and selling of their products, but will not have to worry about legal action in the UK—if any is ever brought—until the entire inquiry finishes and a final report is published; a process which will not be complete for years.

Thousands of tower block residents throughout the UK continue to live in the shadow of death. A House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report published last week found that only a third (155 out of 455) of high-rises with Grenfell-style cladding have had dangerous cladding removed, while people living in the unsafe blocks were “condemned to lives of stress and fear.” Thousands of residents in high-rises continue to complain, years after the Grenfell fire, about paying for the 24-hour “waking watches” patrols that monitor fire danger.

The ruling elite is hoping that the Grenfell tragedy will quietly fade away, chloroformed by a pointless multi-year inquiry and by its determination to ensure the guilty in corporate and political circles evade justice.

The Grenfell community must take matters into their own hands and end collaboration with this sham Inquiry that has no powers of prosecution and has—in alliance with the Tories—ensured that corporations giving testimony are immune from future prosecution! The Socialist Equality Party calls on Grenfell survivors and the bereaved to demand the immediate arrest and criminal prosecution of the guilty parties.

For further information visit and join the Grenfell Fire Forum Facebook page.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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